



City of Loma Linda Official Report

Robert Christman, Mayor
Stan Brauer, Mayor pro tempore
Floyd Petersen, Councilmember
Rhodes Rigsby, Councilmember
Robert Ziprick, Councilmember

COUNCIL AGENDA: September 26, 2006

TO: City Council

VIA: Dennis R. Halloway, City Manager

FROM: Michael Norris, Fire Chief

SUBJECT: Reclassification of Firefighter Apprentices to Firefighters
accompanied by the corresponding pay and benefit increases.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the City Council:

1. Eliminate the Firefighter Apprentice program as it is currently formed.
2. Replace current program with permanent, fully paid and benefited employees fulfilling the job description of Firefighter and classified as such at City of Loma Linda Salary Range #129.
3. Reclassify current six Firefighter Apprentices as said Firefighters.
4. Determine the reclassification to become effective October 1, 2006.
5. Initiate process of implementing an Emergency Medical Services subscription and fee program to offset the costs of providing Advanced Life Support services through the fire department.

BACKGROUND

On Labor day 2000, the City of Loma Linda embraced a new Paramedic program. Since that day the fire department has provided first response Advanced Life Support (ALS) to the citizens. Since the inception of this service the fire department has taken incremental steps based on service demands and can now staff all three critical front line units. This enables the department to provide advanced life support care in the quickest time when needed on almost 3000 calls for service each year. Currently the department has six (6) Firefighter Paramedics, two per shift. ALS care on the third out apparatus is achieved by using Engineers or Captains who have as of this date retained their paramedic certification. This flexibility is created by four Engineers, one Captain and one Chief officer who have retained their certification. The balance of the department personnel are Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) certified and provide basic life support service.

In May 2004 the council approved the establishment of the Firefighter/Apprentice (FF/A) program in order to achieve minimum staffing requirements based on an increasing call volume and the frequency of multiple calls for service at near simultaneous time spans. Approval was given to hire six (6) Apprentices that were obtained from the Paid Call Firefighter program. These six additional personnel were strategically divided between the three shifts to

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increase the daily on duty staffing to eight (8) and thus providing the ability to staff one Medic Engine, one Medic Truck and one Medic Squad along with the duty Chief twenty four hours a day.

The Firefighter Apprentices are an integral part of each shift that now consists of 2 Captains, 2 Engineers, 2 Firefighter Paramedics and 2 Firefighters (Apprentices). As part of required minimum staffing these integral team members are relied on to fulfill the same scope and responsibilities as Firefighter Paramedics with the exception of ALS skills and certification. The Firefighter Apprentices work the same 56 hr/wk work schedule and are held to the same training and performance standards as all other department personnel. Like all personnel, the Firefighter Apprentices are subject to off duty recall or being held over to remain on duty in order to fulfill minimum staffing requirements. The Apprentices essentially fulfill the job description identified in the Fire Department Operations Manual as a career "Firefighter".

The Firefighter Apprentice position is compensated at \$9.95/hr. Apprentices also have medical insurance and a portion of their retirement paid by the city. The hourly rate for Firefighter (range #129) is \$14.92-\$18.57 (A-F step). For those Firefighters that achieve Advanced Life Support (ALS) certification and fill Firefighter Paramedic roles the hourly rate is \$16.90-\$21.30 (A-F step).

Additionally, during the discussions in 2000, it was determined that in order to meet Advanced Life Support needs, all new hires to the Fire Department should be Paramedics. This position was supported by the council in order to assure success of the paramedic program and secure first response advanced life support service for the citizens.

ANALYSIS

In August 2006, the Mayor appointed a subcommittee to further analyze details of the issue at hand. This subcommittee consists of Councilman Brauer, Councilman Petersen, City Manager Halloway and Fire Chief Norris. During the two meetings of this subcommittee the following items were addressed.

- In 2004, per the recommendations of Fire Department Administration and endorsement of the labor organization, council approved six additional full time positions to meet demands of the increasing call volume and frequency. Due to the fiscal impact it was determined that these positions should be introduced in the form of a "Firefighter Apprentice Program" that would in effect provide the required services at a reduced rate. Since their inception, the apprentice positions have filled the integral role of "Firefighter" within the organization and are essential to the fire departments service delivery model. Without these personnel the fire department would be forced to shut down one emergency response company. This reduction in service would result in the department's inability to respond to approximately 15-20% of its responses within acceptable time frames.

- Although the title Firefighter "Apprentice" implies that these employees are learning the trade from more senior firefighters, the reality is that since day one of the apprentice program these employees have been the only employees filling the organizations job description of firefighter. These employees are in fact fully trained and qualified journey level firefighters. These members are not only essential to the department's daily operations, but are also key assets in preserving and planning for its future.
- The Fire Department is experiencing drastically high turnover rates predominantly in the Firefighter Apprentice and Firefighter Paramedic ranks. The department estimates that greater than thirty (30) personnel have left the organization within the last five years. The subcommittee believes that the turnover rate could be slowed to some degree by the reclassification of the Firefighter Apprentices to Firefighter positions.
- Loma Linda is a unique community. The complexity of its institutional facilities, its geography, its demographics and target hazards require in depth familiarity and knowledge. This level of familiarity and training is only accomplished by retaining personnel long-term and fostering an environment that encourages employees to invest their careers within this community. The constant rotation of new personnel is hampering the ability of the department to instill this necessary knowledge and is compromising the departments operations and readiness. Operational readiness also relies on crew members having trained and worked and blending their unique roles together as would a football squad in its execution of a given play. Fire department crews best achieve this ability to execute like a finely tuned machine by working and training together over a period of years to the point that they anticipate each others moves. This organization will not achieve maximum tactical efficiency in this regard without stopping turnover.
- It is also recognized that high turnover rates are having significant fiscal impact. Fire administration has identified key areas of unnecessary spending related to employee turnover such as: repetitive basic training, repetitive cycle of equipping new employees with safety gear, new employee background checks, new employees psychological tests, new employee physical exams and an inordinate amount of staff time spent on test preparation, interviewing and hiring. The department estimates the combined hard costs and staff time investment in these processes to be approximately \$600,000.00 over the last five years.
- In regards to the philosophy that all new hires be paramedic certified, it was recognized and unanimously agreed that the Fire Chief has the ability to determine the focus or skill set firefighter is required to have at a given time in order to facilitate staffing an all risk, all response fire department. The Fire Chief can then advise council regarding staffing requirements and allow them input in the process. It is recommended that the current hiring of personnel be the six current apprentices. Should Council determine that all future firefighters be paramedics that can be accomplished with the appropriate budget adjustments needed at that time.
- It was also consensus of the majority of the subcommittee that the city should recognize the investment and loyalty of the current apprentices who do fulfill the scope and role as the departments Firefighters by reclassifying them and formally recognizing them as such, Firefighters.